

Australian state election dominated by alienation and discontent

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21 March 2019

Such is the level of disgust and disaffection with the Australian political establishment, that this Saturday's election in New South Wales (NSW), the country's most populous state, could produce a "hung" parliament, with no party able to form a majority government.

Years of widening social inequality and worsening living conditions under successive Liberal-National and Labor governments have created deep discontent within broad layers of the working class, which finds no voice within the official political setup. Real wages are in serious decline and youth unemployment is at endemic levels, including in Sydney, the state capital and the country's financial industry hub. Rural poverty is widespread.

The state's official unemployment rate is 3.7 percent, largely as a result of a six-year property boom, which is now crashing. But the rate is more than three times higher in working-class suburbs, such as Liverpool, Fairfield, South Granville and Mount Druitt, and in regional centres like Albury, Tamworth and Nowra.

These statistics are just one indicator of the yawning gulf between the corporate elite, whose wealth has soared since the 2008 global financial meltdown, and the workers and youth who have paid the price via casualised employment, record levels of household debt and deteriorating social services and infrastructure.

Billions of dollars have been poured into corporate pockets for long-delayed and mostly privatised road and rail projects, while the state has more than 1,000 dysfunctional demountable school classrooms and the median waiting time for "elective surgery" in public hospitals has risen to 234 days. More than 37,700 people experience homelessness on any night—up by 40 percent in eight years—and falling house prices mean that many households now owe more on their mortgages than the market value of their homes.

Another indication of mass discontent was expressed last Friday, when tens of thousands of school students, in towns and cities throughout the country, joined their international counterparts by walking out of their classrooms to take a political stand against the escalating threat of climate change

and the governments and corporations responsible for it. Notably, they did so in defiance of disciplinary threats from the state government and school principals.

State Labor Party leader, Michael Daley, used the strike to criticise the current Liberal-National Coalition government for denouncing the students, but both major parties have failed to come anywhere near a commitment to the students' demand for 100 percent renewables by 2030—let alone any broad, scientifically-worked out plan to halt climate change and prevent the planet's destruction.

The lack of any fundamental differences between the major establishment parties has seen the state's voters deluged by negative attack ads and mud-slinging, accompanied by phony promises to suddenly make available billions of dollars to tackle the longstanding decline in public health and education, enforced by both Labor and Coalition-led governments for decades.

The agenda of whichever party leads the next government has been determined in advance: to impose the burden of the intensifying capitalist breakdown onto the backs of the working class.

Buried by the corporate media, an official pre-election budget update warned that global factors, including "rising political tensions, policy uncertainty, financial market volatility and hikes in trade tariffs" were clouding the state's economic outlook. In particular, "deteriorating conditions in the housing market are having a stronger than expected negative impact on consumer spending and dwelling approvals."

According to market analysts, Sydney's median house price has fallen more than 10 percent from its peak in mid-2017 and worse is yet to come. As well as throwing over-stretched working-class families deeper into financial stress, this is stripping billions of dollars from state government revenues.

The election is also being held amid a deepening political crisis.

After 16 years in office, the last pro-business and notoriously corrupt Labor government was thrown out in

2011, reducing Labor's vote to an historic low of 25.5 percent. At the last state election in 2015, Labor's vote rose to just 34.4 percent, despite its hypocritical efforts to exploit the hostility to the federal Coalition government.

Opinion polls indicate little pickup in Labor's support since then, leaving it short of winning the 13 seats in the 93-seat lower house needed to form a majority government. But the Coalition is also languishing at less than 40 percent.

A defeat for the eight-year-old Coalition state government is likely to intensify the factional war inside the unstable federal Coalition government, which must go to an election by the end of May.

Last year, NSW Liberal MPs urged Prime Minister Scott Morrison to call an early federal poll, in order to get "smashed" and improve the chances of the Coalition clinging onto office in NSW. Instead, Morrison has delayed the federal election for as long as possible, and certainly until after the NSW vote.

State Premier Gladys Berejikilian is a member of the Liberal Party's "moderate" wing, as was Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, whom the party's "hard right" faction removed last year. There is nothing remotely progressive, however, about either faction, with both supporting deeper attacks on living conditions and democratic rights, and stirring up nationalism and anti-immigrant xenophobia.

Berejikilian's defeat, however, would intensify the federal inner-party crisis. The "hard right," led by Morrison and Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, would exploit the loss to intensify its push to transform the Coalition into an anti-immigrant, populist and fascistic movement, along the lines of Trump in the US and far-right parties in Europe.

Both Berejikilian and Labor's Daley have contributed to the demonisation of immigrants, blaming them for the lack of infrastructure, loss of full-time jobs and other social problems. Berejikilian has agitated for months for the halving of immigration into NSW. Following last Friday's fascist attack on Muslims in New Zealand, a speech by Daley surfaced on social media showing him accusing Asian immigrants and other "foreigners" of "moving in and taking" the jobs of "our kids."

"White Australia" nationalism and racism, upon which the trade unions established the Labor Party in the 1890s, remains at the core of their political DNA. This has been underscored by the fact that Mark Latham, who led the Labor Party nationally less than 15 years ago, is standing in the NSW election as the lead candidate for the virulent anti-immigrant Pauline Hanson's One Nation, one of a plethora of far-right parties seeking to divert growing working class unrest into reactionary racist and nationalist directions.

Daley, who was installed as Labor leader last November, is being presented in the corporate media as new and

relatively unknown. Given the level of popular hostility, this is regarded as an electoral advantage. In reality, he was a roads, police and finance minister in the last Labor government, which boosted the police force to deal with social unrest, sold off the state's electricity retail assets, axed jobs and sent household power prices soaring, in order to accelerate the privatisation of public services and utilities.

The union bureaucrats, who policed the last Labor government's policies, in tandem with the pseudo-left groups, such as Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, are campaigning, yet again, for the return of another big business Labor government, perhaps in alliance with the Greens, as a supposed "lesser evil."

This claim has been peddled at virtually every Australian state and federal election for decades, and millions of ordinary people now know it to be a lie. Both major parties unashamedly represent the financial and corporate interests of the country's "power elites," and both are utterly impervious to the crisis facing the vast bulk of the population. Moreover, Labor and the Liberal-National coalition, along with the Greens, fully support the country's military alliance with the US, and are deeply implicated in Washington's drive to war against China, in order to reinforce its global hegemony.

Workers and youth need to take firm stand against the new round of lies being promoted in the 2019 NSW state election, and turn to the socialist and internationalist perspective that alone represents the interests of the working class. That is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party, for social equality, for democratic rights, including freedom for Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning, and for the international unity of the working class in the struggle against austerity and war.



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